

5th Sunday in Lent

Breathe fresh life into your people

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

There's a sense of desolation in our readings this morning. Ezekiel, the psalmist, the Gospel of John: all capture a feeling of despair, of hopelessness. Which is not, let's be really clear, a good way to lead us in to our Annual General Meeting – even though gatherings like this can sometimes raise questions about our life, identity, and future. We have these readings today, of course, because they foreshadow and prepare us for Holy Week – but just as the Bible doesn't hide away from the darkness we sometimes experience, it also invites us to celebrate strength, new hope and renewed calling. To name some of the faithfulness, generosity and health of this Cathedral parish. Because these readings aren't only about crisis – they're about God's extraordinary creativity and renewal, and that applies too for people who, like us, are already alive, faithful, and flourishing. Today they encourage us to ask: how is God enlarging our life together?

Ezekiel is enduring the agony of exile: the people of Israel are like dried-out bones, shattered, afraid and far from home. Ezekiel doesn't deny the dryness, but his vision awakens hope. "Prophecy to these bones": God is inviting Ezekiel into collaboration, asking him to speak hope before the community can see hope. We discern here God's capacity, not just to restore what's broken, but also to deepen and extend life. Here is the re-formation of a people into new life and new shape for mission. We're being called to speak and act so that new life is possible for those around us. So here's a question for us to ask ourselves as we go into the AGM: what new life is God breathing into us? What fresh collaboration with the Holy Spirit might be unfolding?

Today's psalm names the tension between waiting and trusting – and that's something we know really well, isn't it. I love the way it manages to hold together repentance, mercy, and God's steadfast love, inviting us to look back over the past year not with fear or defensiveness, but with hope. In a sense, we're always waiting in hope for the Lord, "for with the Lord there is love unfailing." As a community we already experience God's faithfulness: this encourages us to continue to do so.

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, inviting them to embrace fullness of life in God's Spirit. He's not talking of course about physical bodies vs souls – Paul's not dismissing the body – but about two very different orientations: a self-contained effort which leaves God out of things vs a transformation that's enabled by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit – that same power that's the mark of God's presence with God's people – is our source of imagination, joy, and energy. I reckon a good AGM is one that reminds us that what really sustains the parish's life isn't just programmes and strategies but the Holy Spirit who makes the Body of Christ come alive. Here's another question to ask ourselves as we go into the AGM: Where have we seen the Spirit nurture new life amongst us over the past year? Because resurrection is already at work – we don't have to wait till Easter.

Which brings us to the Gospel reading – the raising of Lazarus. Here Jesus shows the power of God, a sign that he bears God's own power over life and death – as so often in the Gospel of John, miracles are part of an unfolding revelation of who Jesus is. Jesus encounters grief,

confronts death, and calls forth life. He weeps at the tomb – this is a Jesus who shares human sorrow, just as we remember with sadness those from this community who have died over the past year. We look back to honour our losses before we look ahead to new life and transformation. Through it all we see Jesus’ deep love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. So much flows from relationship – in Jesus’ life, and in the life of our parish.

Even though Jesus knows he is the resurrection and the life, even though he knows he will make a difference, he weeps. He’s come to reveal the power of God over life and death, but what this also reveals is the depth of love in God’s heart. Many Christians glimpse here an echo of the Father’s grief at the cross.

Jesus weeps at the tomb, and then bids them take away the stone which seals it. Martha – don’t you just love Martha, ever-practical – warns him about the smell, but they remove it anyway. And do we spot what’s going on here? Jesus gives the community a role in all this: Take away the stone. Unbind him, and let him go. Resurrection is God’s work – but the community is called to be involved: moving the stone, removing the grave clothes. Invitations to participate in what God is doing. Here’s another question as we go into the AGM: How might Jesus be inviting this parish to “take away stones” to welcome more life, more people, new possibilities? What might need “unbinding” so that new ministries can emerge and grow?

We hear the Lazarus story and are reminded that Jesus is the resurrection and the life: because of Jesus, death no longer has power over us. Not only that, but because of Jesus despair and desolation no longer have power over us. There’s so much in these readings: about new life and hope, about the abundance of God’s power reaching into every corner of our community. About being invited to collaborate with God: Ezekiel prophesies, the psalmist waits in confidence, Paul reminds the Romans how the Spirit lives within the community, the folk at Bethany roll away stones. So as we go into our AGM, let’s remember this: the God who breathes life, indwells us with the Spirit, and calls communities into new possibilities is doing so here, with all of us, inviting us not just to survive, but to flourish, to face into the future with love, peace, and joy. As our Prayers of the People invite us to pray:

Father, enliven the Church for its mission, that we may be salt of the earth and light to the world. Breathe fresh life into your people. Give us power to reveal Christ in word and action.

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